

CULTURAL
MEDALLION
2015

HARESH SHARMA



Hareesh Sharma (b. 1965) is a playwright of considerable creative versatility, with works ranging from experimental pieces and interdisciplinary projects to dramatic social commentaries. Sharma became a member of The Necessary Stage (TNS) while still an undergraduate at the National University of Singapore (NUS), and began his tenure as Resident Playwright of TNS in 1990, after graduating. In 1994, Sharma received the Shell-National Arts Council Scholarship to pursue postgraduate study in playwriting at the University of Birmingham.

Sharma's corpus of work comprises over a hundred plays which tackle social concerns affecting Singaporeans, such as attitudes to illness, interracial relations and societal malaises. His treatment of these issues has been defined by a commitment to representing them truthfully, and attentiveness to cultural authenticity, particularly in depicting Singaporean languages and the way of life of Singaporean characters. *Fundamentally Happy* (2006), *Good People* (2007) and *Gemuk Girls* (2008), all of which received the award for Best Original Script at *The Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards*, typify the socially conscious bent of his writing. *Off Centre* (1993) came to be known as TNS's landmark play and is best remembered for bringing public awareness to the issue of mental illness. It became the first Singaporean play to be included in the Ministry of Education's 'O' Level syllabus for English Literature. Sharma has also written for interdisciplinary collaborations, such as *Gitanjali [I feel the earth move]* (2014), in which more universal themes are dramatised.

Alongside his work as a playwright, Sharma has supervised the work of budding playwrights. He has worked as an adjunct tutor for the Theatre Studies programme at NUS and as a mentor on the Creative Arts Programme, which nurtures talented young writers from participating secondary schools and junior colleges.

Sharma's plays have been staged in major cities around the world such as Tokyo, Melbourne, Cairo, Hong Kong, Glasgow, Rome, New York, and London and garnered recognition in Singapore and abroad. In 1997, he was conferred the Young Artist Award by the National Arts Council. In 2011, he became the first non-American to be invited to teach as the Goldberg Master Playwright at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. In 2014, Sharma was awarded the prestigious Southeast Asian Writers Award, which honours literary excellence in the region. Sharma's writing continues to be a subject of academic interest locally and internationally.



Weaving Difference with Pragmatism and Ideals: The Necessary Work of Haresh Sharma

By Charlene Rajendran

Writing dialogue did not just come naturally; it gave him confidence and clarity about why he needed to write.

When Haresh Sharma sits down to write a play he draws from multiple resources and many voices. His work is seldom created in isolation, and thus his craft as a writer rarely resembles that of someone grappling with words in solitude. Instead as a deviser-writer he seeks out collaborators who will tell stories, instigate ideas, produce images, concoct sounds and generate movements – intertwined in a process of continuous research and dialogue that culminates in performance. Many of his texts juxtapose voices, vocabularies and worlds that are deemed unrelated, recasting all kinds of people and communities as somehow deeply inter-connected. Despite the mainstream tendency to segregate and communalise society these performances build bridges and transcend boundaries, remaining attentive to particular histories and personal politics. For Sharma's skills lie in weaving diverse ideas into a strong, yet delicate fabric, such that the human spirit surmounts categories, even if everyday life is bound by naming and classification.

As the full-time Resident Playwright of The Necessary Stage (TNS) since 1990, Sharma has written more than a hundred plays, all of which have been staged and many of which have been published. He has received local and international acclaim, including the prestigious Southeast Asian Writers



Rehearsal with the cast of *Gitanjali I I feel the earth move* at The Necessary Stage Black Box (2014). Photo credit: Tan Ngiap Heng

Award (a.k.a. SEA Write Award) in 2014, and the Goldberg Master Playwright by New York University's Tisch School of the Arts in 2011 – of which he is the first non-American recipient. His writing has been praised for its mastery of dialogue, elegance of storytelling and political acuity in contemporary times. To do this, Sharma references history, politics, memory, identity, tradition and modernity, incorporating material that spans domestic strife and political incarceration, cultural displacement and mental health. Peering into the everyday and probing the fantastical to feed his imagination, a curiosity about life as multi-faceted infuses all his work.

Of Sindhi-Indian descent, fluent in English and growing up with Malay as his first language, Sharma is accustomed to the push and pull of difference as a regular part of multi-cultural Singapore. He hears several languages daily and listens intently to the dialogue – regardless of whether he understands the words. Thus he gains sensitivity to the nuances and rhythms of language, and observes cultural practice to heighten his own contextual literacy. He trusts these instincts to inform his craft as they enable him to detect when an actor is disconnected with what is being said. Where necessary, translations are never a simple linear process from one language into another, but a negotiation between translators, actors and the writer – to find the right word or the perfect phrase. For if he must, Sharma will try several ways of expressing an idea. And finding the right word for the right moment gives him tremendous pleasure.

Sharma confesses that he is enticed and challenged by what he can do with language. He knew as a young person that he would become a writer, but it was not until he started writing plays that he knew which medium would suit him. Writing dialogue did not just come naturally; it gave him confidence and clarity about why he needed to write. Inspired by postcolonial writers such as K.S. Maniam, Wole Soyinka and Kuo Pao Kun, who have shaped their own 'Englishes' to suit the characters and situations they write about, the English of Sharma's plays is also particular and contextually-grounded. Hence his English can sound Chinese, Malay or Indian when needed.

Plays created to perform the intricacies of this mix are not merely exotic representations of otherness. They are empathetic insights into the challenges of crossing boundaries, spanning the pain of discrimination and the joys of interaction. Having collaborated internationally across several borders, Sharma sets no limits about what can be broached. As such Sharma's texts gain currency as 21st century articulations of global citizenry, in which belonging exceeds nationalist or racialised confines. Developing inter-disciplinary and inter-cultural frames to incorporate the shifting warp and weft that reflect contemporary life,

Sharma attends to how each thread affects the overall weave. In turn, there is no specific content or form that marks his writing, and difference is simply part of the human condition.

In *Best Of*, written in collaboration with director Alvin Tan, and performer Siti Khalijah Zainal, the protagonist is a bilingual Malay-Muslim young woman. She grapples with her marginal position in society, and speaks English with a blend of rhythms depending on who she speaks to and why. Here Sharma reprises a working method that marked an early production, *Lanterns Never Go Out*, in which he listens closely to the stories told by an actor and then writes the play in a language that reflects the multiplicity present. What transpires on the rehearsal floor is then largely responsible for what inspires Sharma when he writes.

Yet Sharma sometimes struggles with the way his name appears in a publication, identifying him as the sole author. At first glance it would seem that Sharma wrote the play alone. Even if the contents of the book include acknowledgements of the roles that directors, actors and others have played in the co-authoring of the work. How else can collaborative work be credited, without denying the writer's importance in structuring and shaping the stories told? Sharma recognises that the life of the play exceeds its performance through publication, and enjoys the way printed plays provide access to wider audiences. But in balancing the hard-headed rationale of the arts industry with the aspirations of an egalitarian work-ethos, he questions the way creative processes can be more equitably represented. Even if there are no easy or conventional answers.

And there is little that is easy or conventional about Sharma's work at TNS, a prominent and ground-breaking theatre company in the Singapore arts landscape. Few realise that apart from writing plays, he is also responsible for running the company on a day-to-day basis. This involves dealing with financial management, logistical planning and personnel relations. It requires Sharma to be thoroughly organised, attentive to data and good with figures, adept at many kinds of problem solving. Having written press releases, gone shopping for costumes, and been involved in producing theatre since he was an undergraduate at the National University of Singapore in the 1980s, he does not demarcate his artistic process as limited to play-making. Instead, he enjoys the creativity of making decisions about how to plan ahead based on available resources, and steer the company towards more strategic positioning for the future. This includes creating platforms for nurturing other artists, and encouraging



¹ *Best Of* was first performed in Singapore at the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival in January 2013, and more recently at the Brisbane Festival from 8-12 September 2015, and in New York at the Something To Write Home About Festival from 18-20 September 2015.

young people to get involved in theatre - many of whom return to work with the company and bolster its continuity². Balancing all this with the task of producing several scripts a year, Sharma's approach to being an artist is highly pragmatic, even as it remains intensely idealistic.

For Sharma makes no bones about his belief in theatre as a potent site for empowering audiences and artists. He is convinced that through the staging and viewing of ideas that advocate social justice and cultural openness, individuals and societies gain agency and progress towards humanitarian co-existence. Sharing this view with his long-time artistic collaborator, Alvin Tan, TNS Founder and Artistic Director, Sharma acknowledges his work as intertwined with Tan's artistic vision and the evolution of TNS. Together, they have navigated through varied storms and struggles to lead the company to create 'challenging, innovative and indigenous theatre that touches the heart and mind'³. They have developed working methods and devising processes that cull and shape material towards performances that are provocative but show empathy, advancing alternatives that critique the status quo, but remain accessible and quotidian.

The TNS collaborative-devising method makes hefty demands on collaborators but offers deep satisfaction for those who share its goals. It draws certain kinds of artists and deters others. It excites those interested to improvise at length and participate in extensive discussions, attracting those who embrace continuous change and are willing to endure long periods of rehearsal. Sometimes the process leads to expressions that are controversial in the critique of the hegemony, as it targets sanctioned bigotry and legitimised indifference. This can result in intricate negotiations to manage personal politics, cultural sensitivities and licensing difficulties. Tensions inevitably arise about how to maintain principles yet keep the production viable. But having known the pleasure of applause as well as the pain of censure, Sharma, with Tan, persists in pushing the boundaries and taking risks. This entails making space for new ways to apprehend the human condition. And crucially, making time to examine what it means to remain 'necessary' - in both pragmatic and idealistic ways.

About the writer

Ms Charlene Rajendran is a theatre educator, researcher, writer and dramaturg. She is currently Assistant Professor at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University.

² These include The Orange Playground, the Playwright's Cove, Theatre for Seniors and Youth Theatre Ensemble at various stages of TNS' history.

³ <http://www.necessary.org/index.php/about-us>. Accessed on 6 September 2015.

WORDS OF APPRECIATION

I have not been alone in my journey of working and practising as a full-time playwright in Singapore.

I give thanks to:

My father.

My family, especially Vijay, Poonam and Nikhil.

And my mother, who I miss every day.

From the early days of The Necessary Stage at National University of Singapore and Telok Ayer Performing Arts Centre to the time we spent at Cairnhill and our home now at Marine Parade, many have entered our doors and touched our hearts, including:

Kah Wei, Joey, Valerie, Ovidia, Elvira

Alin, Latiff, Sakinah, Hossan, Gerry, Freddie, Rajesh

Clarisse, Heng Leun, Su Lin

Zelda, Verena, Pern Yiau, Helmi

Karen, Jean, Julius

Rydwan, Joyah, Sia Ang

Su-Lin, Nat & Sharon, Tze Chien, Alfian, Brian, Zihan

Bea and Mark, Sean, Serena, Kumar

Siti K, Sharda, Bani

Michele, Syren, Sasi and Pao Kun.

The Necessary Stage Board of Directors past and present

National Arts Council supporters: Ching Lee, Ai Liang, Mee Lian, Elaine and Benson.

Vincent

Navin

Tina, who will always be remembered.

My deepest appreciation to Charlene Rajendran for nominating me and the Cultural Medallion Specialist Panel for selecting me.

Thank you National Arts Council for championing the arts in Singapore.

The people at my happy place - Melissa, Jeza, Irma, Edlyn, Shaggy, Joyce and Shawn.

And Alvin.